New Ball Game in Washington

In 2005, Washington was abuzz with excitement over the return of Major League baseball to the nation’s capital. But 2007 brings an even more important game to town: a more consumer-friendly Congress.

After six years of serving as a doormat for the Administration on global warming, health care, social security, and countless other problems, Congress has begun exercising its constitutional obligation to serve as a balance on the executive branch.

Funding priorities will change. Consumer-protection laws have at least a chance of being passed. And, I hope, oversight hearings will force the Food and Drug Administration and other government agencies to do the job that the public expects them to do.

So what should the new Congress do to promote health and nutrition? Here are a few suggestions:

■ Greatly increase funding to enable the FDA to prevent foodborne illnesses, stop deceptive labeling, and target unsafe ingredients like trans fat and salt. Notwithstanding the agency’s greater responsibilities in recent decades—and a series of serious food-poisoning outbreaks—the staff of the FDA’s Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition will have fallen by 14 percent from 2003 to 2007.

■ Modernize 100-year-old food-safety laws by combining the FDA and USDA, and by giving the unified agency authority to inspect facilities and remove unsafe foods from stores.

■ Mandate simple nutrition symbols on the fronts of food labels, list the amounts of added sugars on nutrition labels, require a health warning on soft drinks, and prohibit high-sugar foods from making low-fat and other health claims. At restaurants, require menus to list calories, bad fat, and sodium, and menu boards to list calories.

■ Levy small taxes on non-diet soft drinks (including those fake fruit drinks), and use at least some of the revenues to fund major media campaigns to encourage people to consume more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and fewer soft drinks, sweets, and fatty meat and dairy foods.

■ Bar scientists with conflicts of interest from serving on committees that advise the government on health, environmental, and safety issues. Having scientists who receive industry funding on FDA committees that evaluate drugs is a real problem.

■ Require the U.S. Department of Agriculture to update its nutrition standards for foods available at vending machines, snack lines, and school stores. The USDA’s current standards, which are out of date, don’t take into account calories, saturated fat, or salt. That means that chips, sport drinks, chocolate, and other junk foods can be sold.

■ Stop the marketing of junk foods to kids via TV commercials, Internet sites, and cartoon-festooned packages.

■ Shift some of the billions of dollars in subsidies currently given to grain and cotton farmers to fruit and vegetable growers (perhaps by buying produce and distributing it to schoolchildren), as well as to small-scale farmers who help protect the environment.

■ Build prevention into America’s healthcare system.

■ Insist that the FDA help the food industry reduce levels of salt in processed foods and set target reduction levels for various categories of food.

It promises to be an interesting year in Congress. If you would like to join CSPI’s Action Network, please visit cspinet.org/takeaction. We periodically encourage our action squad to send e-mails and letters to government and industry officials, and to participate in our opinion surveys.

Thank you.

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